Software for Hard Times

Increased competition, smaller budgets, higher fuel costs—working smart is a must for any refuse company. In Chillicothe, IL, Area Disposal Co. uses software to keep tabs on many facets of his firm's operations. "We use i-Pak, particularly the Scale-Pak, the sales management, and the vehicle management software," Area Disposal's Manager of Operations Doyle Collins says. "The vehicle management tracks mileage, as well as the fuel and fluids used. It can be an inventory of things you use in the vehicle, although we don't use that much right now." The software Collins mentions are products of Soft-Pak Inc. An integrated software solution, i-Pak provides a comprehensive customer service package; online dispatching with route management; billing, accounts receivable, and collections; route productivity and profitability reporting; inventory tracking, sales management, and fleet maintenance; scale and landfill ticketing; and extensive management reporting. Various additional modules may be added. Scale-Pak works with MRF, transfer station, or landfill operations, allowing the use of unattended scales and "speed pass" lanes.

"i-Pak organizes my routes," Collins explains. "It's an all-encompassing tool; it does billing and general ledger, receivables, collections, productivity reports. It generates current and future work by using work orders. We use the same software to keep track of all our trucks—about 200 of them—whether tenance; scale and landfill ticketing; and extensive management reporting. Various additional modules may be added. Scale-Pak works with MRF, transfer station, or landfill operations, allowing the use of unattended scales and "speed pass" lanes.

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"We also use a plug-in called Route Smart, which interfaces with i-Pak. This route optimization program suggests procedures such as 'only right turns'—working in a spiral—to save time and fuel. Right now, our drivers

weigh everyone coming in and going out. For our regular customers, we can use an 'empty weight' program; we already know what their vehicles' weights are. We're looking toward an unattended scale house, which should become active in the next year. At present, customers are typing in different information about their loads, inserting a credit card, and punching buttons, much like an ATM. Right now, we have attendants at each scale. As customers' vehicles are numbered, the scale master can key in the quick identifier for that client, as we have all their pertinent information preloaded. However, we want to get at least five good weighs on a particular truck before placing it in the automatic empty weigh program."

The updates seen at the Chillicothe location are mirrored throughout the rest of the company. "This is an independent, family-owned company," Collins explains, "encompassing both Peoria Disposal Co. and Area Disposal Co. The entire firm services an As customers' vehicles are numbered, the scale master can key in the quick identifier for that client, as we have all their pertinent information preloaded. However, we want to get at least five good weighs on a particular truck before placing it in the automatic empty weigh program."

The updates seen at the Chillicothe location are mirrored throughout the rest of the company. "This is an independent, family-owned company," Collins explains, "encompassing both Peoria Disposal Co. and Area Disposal Co. The entire firm services an area covering from Henry to Decatur, IL, as well as specific markets from Missouri to Indiana. We're ranked nationally at about the 26th largest, collecting all sorts of waste—residential, commercial, and industrial. We operate landfills and transfer stations, and we also operate laboratories where we test for leachate and metals."

have to provide the best service, but we also need to be paid for what we do. Some communities understand this, and now have 'pay per bag' programs. We also offer single-stream recycling, which is not always a money maker. When we sell some of the valuable items, such as aluminum; it helps us break even, because with some recycling items, we have to pay the recycler to take them. We're seeing trends toward regional landfills and transfer stations, probably to keep landfills further away from residential areas. This can increase our fuel costs, but sometimes it's worth driving farther to get a lower price for disposal and tipping fees. We're lucky. We have our own landfills, and at two of them we capture methane, which we can sell.

"Using software helps with many of these challenges," he adds. "Automation assists with collections and billing, because we also have to be considerate of the economy and residents' financial challenges. For example, clients who 'pay per bag' receive free recy-transfer stations, probably to keep landfills further away from residential areas. This can increase our fuel costs, but sometimes it's worth driving farther to get a lower price for disposal and tipping fees. We're lucky. We have our own landfills, and at two of them we capture methane, which we can sell.

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Times change, and so does the industry. "You tend to evolve to what the changes are; the change pushes the products, services, et cetera. A lot of times, we find we can't do it

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Soft-Pak is the leader in billing, customer service, and operational software for the waste and recycling industry. In early 2009 Soft-Pak released i-Pak Version 4, the latest software designed to effectively manage private and municipal hauling operations. New enhancements in productivity, reporting, scale automation, and online bill presentment for customers has increased the core functionality of i-Pak. Allowing for Web-based payments that automatically update receivables makes for quicker collections and better customer service. Soft-Pak continues to deliver the products that hauling operations need to stay ahead of the competition.

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get their route sheets on paper; we're looking into onboard computers that would interface with this—maybe next year. Onboard computers would also allow us to know where the truck is at any point, for dispatching." The reason Collins wants such oversight? "We're looking for productivity. With Soft-Pak, you can identify what you've moved onto the route, so you know the revenue on the route. Let's say a truck breaks down two streets away. If you know this situation immediately, you can move customers and revenue to the backup truck that takes over for the first truck."

Area Disposal bills residential customers quarterly, in advance. "People can now pay online through our Web site—thanks to Soft-Pak's Web-Pak module. As others use our landfills, such as other haulers and private citizens, we're putting credit card readers on customer service representatives' terminals. This should not only speed up lines, but it also will allow us to reduce our labor costs, because such a terminal could be nearly self-service."

Soft-Pak's software runs Area's scales, too. "All the modules run together—data is usable throughout the system. We of course

Collins muses on the most important challenges facing waste managers: "Finding good qualified drivers. We've changed our hiring procedures and are screening applications, along with background checks; in addition, each of our drivers has to take a fitness test; they have to be able to satisfy certain criteria. The most qualified applicants are selected based on their skills. They, of course, need a CDL license, and then they go through a training period. For a driver who's never worked in waste, it takes them from 30 to 90 days to learn how to do the job. Depending on their experience, they may need training on certain rigs, as we operate rolloffs; rear, side, and front load trucks; semi-tractor trailers; and tankers."

Competition and the economy also rank high. "Collecting money can be a big challenge. We have competition challenges; we

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the traditional way. We not only have to be responsive to our corporation, but also sensitive to customers. Over the years, I've seen more automation in collections; I'm sure insurance and workers comp costs are moving the changes. For example, there are a lot less injuries when drivers just have to push a button to collect trash, versus them getting out into traffic and lugging heavy cans."

Collins predicts future changes. "There will probably be more automation, more ergonomics than in the past, because safety's a big consideration," he says. "We do require eye protection, long pants, work boots, reflective shirts, et cetera. Dust can be a problem. If required, workers are fit-tested for respirators, and hearing protection. Even where someone stands when using the truck compactor has an impact on safety. Sensors on trucks tell you there's something behind you. In procedures, in attitude, our industry strives to project a more professional image. But the main thing is training, training, and more training. And driver retention," he concludes.   **MSW**

*Writer and garbologist **Janis Keating** is a frequent contributor to Forester publications.*